

CORRECTED TRANSCRIPT

Interview with MILTON COLEMAN Interviewed by Richard Maulsby

Milton Coleman was a reporter and editor at the *Washington Post* from 1976 until 2012. He covered DC politics and government from 1976-1980 and served as city editor from 1980-1983 and metropolitan editor from 1986-1996. At the time of the 1978 District mayoral elections, he was the chief city hall reporter for the *Post* and lived in Ward 7. He retired from The Post in 2012 as Senior Editor. He currently is the ombudsman for the Corporation for Public Broadcasting.

Date: July 28, 2016

RM: So, Milton, could you just begin to tell us just a little bit about your background? Where you grew up, where you went to school, what brought you to Washington, DC.

MC: Okay. Well, I'm from Milwaukee, Wisconsin. I grew up in Milwaukee, attended the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, which is not to be confused with what everybody calls the University of Wisconsin, which is in Madison. Went to school there. Grew up in public housing. Went to school at UWM by luck because at that time the university gave tuition scholarships for one year to the top two graduates in every Milwaukee public high school. I was number five in my class, but one of the guys ahead of me went into the military, and there were two girls ahead of me who came from families that did not believe women should go to college. So I kicked up from number five to number two, and so I got this big tuition scholarship for \$128 a semester, and went to UWM. My undergraduate major was in the history and literature of western music. I wanted to be, initially, a high school band director. So I started out in music education, but finally graduated with a degree in music history and literature, hoping to do graduate work and become an ethnomusicologist specializing in African and African American music. But then I got tied up in the black student movement and got my first newspaper job at the

Milwaukee Courier, a black weekly, and moved to North Carolina to work with a national black student organization. Came to Washington for the first time in 1972, because I was writing for something called the *All-African News Service*, which was a sort of a Pan-African news service aimed at black weeklies and college papers.

In 1974, I got into the Michele Clark Summer Program for Minority Journalists at the Graduate School of Journalism at Columbia University. That was an eleven-week summer program. I left there, did a year-plus at the *Minneapolis Star*, which was then an evening paper in Minneapolis. Came to the *Washington Post* on May 12th, 1976, covering Montgomery County and government and politics. And then in September or maybe November of that year, I came to the city staff, assigned to cover the District Building.

RM: How did that process work, getting hired at the *Washington Post*? Did you actually apply for a job there, or did they recruit you? How does that process work?

MC: I had applied at the *Post* for the first time, I think, in 1973 or '72, because I knew people who were working at that time in daily media. I worked in black media, and I could never get to first base. Meanwhile, I knew people who were in the Michele Clark Summer Program for Minority Journalists, which was an eleven-week summer program that sort of took people like me who didn't have any credentials to work in a daily newspaper, and sort of laundered us through the best journalism school in the country, and then placed us at various newspapers. And I got placed at the *Minneapolis Star*. And in the summer program, the person running the summer program that year was Bob Maynard, Robert C. Maynard, one of the pioneering black journalists, and a guy named John Dotson, the late John Dotson, who, at the time, was the chief of correspondents for

Newsweek, which meant that he was like the managing editor of *Newsweek*. Both Bob and John Dotson were black.

And I had applied to the *Post*, never gotten to first base. Gone to Minneapolis at the behest of Bob Maynard, who was a mentor, and who just really sort of nurtured me and groomed me. At the time, Bob was on the editorial staff of the *Post* and may have at one point been the ombudsman, but I'm not sure about that. Anyway, I had been writing to Bob because I had said, "Bob, I really don't want to go to Minneapolis." And in his typical way, he said, "Well, you need to go." Okay. And you had to stay for a year. That was the deal, you had to stay for a year. So it was almost a year, and I had been sending back clips to Bob Maynard and Joel Dreyfuss, who were both at the *Post*. So I was really going crazy in Minneapolis, and I called Maynard one day, and I said, "Bob, I want out of here now. I've got to get out of here." To which Maynard responded in his wonderful Maynardian way, "Who have you sent to jail lately?" I said, "Excuse me?" He said, "Who have you sent to jail lately?" I said, "Look, I ain't sent nobody to jail, Maynard." "Okay. Call me when you have." That was the way Maynard was. So I was stringing for the *Post* at that time because there was an election in Minneapolis for mayor. At the time, I was covering the mayor and the city council, and had become the sort of *Minneapolis Star's* municipal budget expert, because I had written a series about finances in Minneapolis. That was around the time that New York City had the big budget crisis under Abe Beame, and I had written a takeout on that. And so for this election and other elections, I was sending feeds to the *Washington Post*, and I got a call from John Dotson saying that there was – two calls. Got a call from John Dotson saying there was an opening in the Washington bureau of *Newsweek*. And also, a couple of

years earlier, I had applied for a job at the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, been interviewed, but not gotten the job. And the person who was then the managing editor there, Gene Foreman, said, “Well, when we have another opening, we’ll get back to you.” I thought to myself, “Yeah, yeah, yeah. Okay.” And a year later, he got back to me. So I had these two offers, and I was up at the *Star* one evening when my wife called and said, “You have a letter from the *Post*.” And I said, “Well, it’s probably a check for doing the stringing.” She says, “Well, it’s somebody named Elsie Carper in the return address.” I said, “Oh, that’s odd, because she’s in charge of personnel. I haven’t sent anything to her.” And it turned out that Bob Maynard – when I was applying for the job at *Newsweek* and the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, I had sent Bob a copy of my portfolio because I wanted him to be a reference for me. He had given the portfolio to Elsie Carper, and Elsie Carper called me in for an interview. It turned out that they had gotten my name from Don Graham, because the *Post* owned *Newsweek* at that time. Dotson had talked to Graham, and the Summer Program for Minority Journalists had this wonderful reputation of turning out really good, outstanding journalists. In fact, Ben Bradlee [executive editor of the *Post*] used to call it Maynard U, not to be confused with Trump U. But Don, apparently, asked John Dotson, “Who have you got good in the program this summer?” and Dotson said, “There’s this guy named Milton Coleman.” And so, I came to the *Post*. I had three interviews: at the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, at *Newsweek*, and at the *Washington Post*. And so, I came down and I did the *Inquirer* first, and that was on like a Wednesday and Thursday. I stayed over because they sent me to Harrisburg, because the job they were going to offer me – the job they did offer me – was in the state capital Bureau. I would have been replacing Warren Brown, who had just

come to the *Washington Post* from the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. And I came down and I wasn't sure I wanted to be at the *Washington Post* because Joel Dreyfuss, who was then at the *Post*, was one of my mentors, and there had been a falling out between Joel and Ben Bradlee.

And as it turned out, over that weekend, I stayed in Joel's apartment up on Columbia Road, and Joel was not there until the day before my interview. He came back on Sunday. And I told Joel, I said, "You know, Joel, if the *Post* does offer me a job, I'm not so sure I'd take it." And Joel said, "Why?" And I said, "Because I don't like what went down between you and Bradlee. I don't think I want to work there." And Joel called me a fool. He said, "You'd be a fool if you did that, because you can go to the *Post*, and that was between me and Bradlee. That doesn't involve you at all. You go to the *Post*, you may be able to accomplish more than I ever accomplished." Prophetic on Joel's part. So the *Post* offers me a job in the Montgomery County bureau.

So I got these two job offers. I go back home to Minneapolis, and Faye says, "Well?" And I said, "I got two job offers. Got one from the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and one from the *Washington Post*." She says, "Well, which one is the better offer?" I said, "The *Philadelphia Inquirer*." She said, "Why?" I said, "Well, if I go to the *Washington Post*, I'll be covering politics and government in Montgomery County. If I go to the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, I'll be covering the governor." And Faye [my wife] said, "Where's the governor?" And I said, "He's in Harrisburg." She said, "I hope you have fun." (Laughter.) We came to Washington.

RM: So how long did you work at Montgomery County bureau before you came into DC?

MC: I came to the *Post* on May 12th. The [Congressional] election in Montgomery County was in September. At the time, the *Post* gave –

Betty King: Is that '73?

MC: No, this is '76. The election there was over, and the general election contest was going to be between Lanny Davis and Newton Steers. And I came in for my three-month evaluation at the *Post*, and Len Downie, who was then the metro editor, and Herb Denton, who was then the city editor, said, "You're doing a great job. In fact, we want to move you to the city staff and have you covering the District Building. But you're doing such a good job in Montgomery County, you can't go until after the November election." Okay. So I stayed there, and then after the November election, I came onto the city staff. I was the one-man replacement for Bobby Bowman and Paul Valentine.

RM: So this is about the time DC got Home Rule, like in '74.

MC: Well, DC got Home Rule before that. The Home Rule Charter was approved (unintelligible 00:13:46) in '73, and '74 was first election. The government took office January 2nd, '75.

RM: But the *Post* had people full-time covering the District Building before you did?

MC: Oh, yeah, and they'd had it for some time, because Bob Kaiser, who eventually became the managing editor, had covered the District Building I think before Bobby and Paul Valentine. So the *Post* already had people there, but the *Post* was covering the District Building in a very different way, because it was very much under the influence, I was led to believe, of Ben Gilbert. Ben had been the city editor or maybe even the deputy managing editor, of the *Washington Post*. Ben, to my understanding – because by the time I got to the *Post*, Ben had gone on to work for Walter Washington – but Ben was

very supportive of the pre-Home Rule government, and maybe even of the first Home Rule government. And the people inside the newsroom at the *Post* thought he was just too friendly to the government at that time.

And then Herb Denton was the city editor, and Herb wanted the *Post* to be much more thorough in their coverage of the District of Columbia, which meant two things. It meant, number one, tougher on the government, the same way we were tough on all other governments, and more deeply rooted in the community. And so, when I came to the *Post*, Herb was the Maryland editor. I was there a month, and he became city editor. And when he became city editor, as all good editors do, he raided his former staff and he brought from the Maryland staff three people who he thought would be very important: Courtland Milloy, who at the time was covering police in Prince George's County; Cynthia Gorney, who was in the Montgomery County bureau with me. Richard, you may remember Cynthia Gorney wrote the very first piece in the *Washington Post* –

RM: I remember that.

MC: – about how you could be gay and live your entire life in Washington around gay folks. Cynthia. And I was the third person. And we were supposed to change the way the *Post* covered the District of Columbia, and I think we did. I covered city hall, District Building very differently, Courtland got out in the community, and Cynthia was the writer. Not only did she write that story, but if you recall, Cynthia Gorney, based on earlier reporting, she wrote the obituary of Julius Hobson, in which Julius Hobson confessed that when he had threatened – at one point, Julius had threatened to capture some rats and let them loose in Georgetown. And everybody said, "Oh, this is terrible," blah, blah, blah. And he admitted to Cynthia, on the condition that it would only be

published after he was gone, he said, “I never let those rats out. I was just really kidding.” But I think we changed that, and it endured for many, many years.

RM: When did you first meet Marion Barry?

MC: I first met Marion probably in late ‘76, because I came to the city staff of the *Washington Post* right in the midst of the Yeldell scandal with Joe Yeldell. In fact, the first time I had a story on the front page of the *Post* that was above the fold was when Joe Yeldell was put on leave. It was a double byline with me and Alice Bonner, because Alice had been covering I guess it was DHS [Department of Human Services] at the time, or DHR, and I was on the mayor. I’m certain that was the first time I had met Marion. I had been to Washington other times before, but I had not met Marion. I knew of Ivanhoe [Donaldson, Barry’s campaign manager in 1978] from when Ivanhoe was on the board, I believe, of the Cummins Engine Foundation, because when I was in North Carolina working with this group called the Student Organization for Black Unity, we had applied for money from the Cummins Engine Foundation. I knew Courtland from the –

Bettyt King: Courtland Cox?

MC: Yeah, Courtland Vernon Cox. The Student Organization for Black Unity [SOBU] was the sort of boots-on-the-ground organization in North Carolina for organizers of Black Power and Pan-Africanism. And when I moved from Milwaukee to North Carolina, I worked for SOBU. My title was coordinator of informational services. I essentially was their propagandist. And they were all tied in with, there were a group of independent black schools, one of which was the Center for Black Education, here on 14th and Fairmont. If you can visualize that area, right down the street from there is an apartment building, and you go around the corner and there is a little street-level boutique, which

was the Drum and Spear Bookstore. Charlie Cobb worked at the Drum and Spear. And Courtland was part of what we called the Washington contingent, Courtland Cox and Acklyn Lynch; Jair Lynch's father, the gymnast Jair Lynch – Acklyn Lynch was his father – and a number of other people. And so, I knew a lot of those people. I knew Cleve Sellers very well. Through Cleve Sellers, I had met Stokely [Carmichael]. So I knew a lot of those people before I got here.

RM: But do you recall what circumstances you met Marion? Was it social?

MC: No, I cannot recall the circumstances under which I met Marion, but it probably was just in going around. Because if you'll recall, at that time, the council offices were on that one end of the fifth floor. The mayor's office was on one side and the council was on the other side. And you go in the door, and [Council Chairman] Sterling [Tucker]'s office was right there, and [Tucker's press spokesman] Alan Grip was right over there next to Sterling, Alan Grip and [Tucker's executive assistant] Rodney Coleman. Then you'd go to the main area, and I think, Marion was the second office, because I think [D.C. Councilman] Doug Moore had the first office, and Marion had the second office. And Pat Seldon was his secretary, and Sybil [Hammond] and Ed Meyers were on the Budget Committee staff. And I'm sure that I went through that wing introducing myself to everybody, because, also, if you went in there and went one way, you hit six or seven offices. If you go the other way, you hit other offices, because [Concilwoman] Willie Hardy was on the other side.

I think that must have been the way I met Marion, because when I came down there, there was this idea about me that, oh, this real tough guy is going to come down here now. And trying always to be a good builder of sources, I decided, okay, I'm going to

need to go in – this is going to have to be a soft launch.” And I tried everything I could to build sources and to be nice and to take people to lunch. On Secretary’s Day, I took every fucking secretary I could find to lunch. And I learned to talk to people and to go up to people and tell them, “I’m not interviewing you. Just, what do you think of the Redskins last week?” just because that’s the way you get to know people.

It got so bad at one point that Marion, who always was incredibly professional with me, Marion told his people, “Don’t talk to him.” And I said, “Why you doing that, Marion?” He said, “No, I tell them all the time.” He said, “He comes up to you and he got his hands in his pocket and he’s just talking to you, he’s taking notes in his head.” Which I was, because I learned at the summer program that what you do whenever you’re talking to a politician is you ask yourself, okay, so I’m talking to this guy and asking myself, Why would he be lying to me? What does have to gain by telling me what he’s saying? And if it’s a lie, what is he gaining? And I’m always taking notes in my head and figuring out, okay, so if (unintelligible 00:24:47) knows this, who knows the next part of the story? And Marion figured that out. I mean, I can remember being in the basement of that restaurant that was on the corner of 13th and F. Was it Two Continents?

RM: Two Continents, which is in the hotel.

MC: Yeah. Marion used to go there to drink martinis, and I remember one time being in the coatroom there with Marion. This would have been ‘78. He was trying to get me to write some story on either Walter [Washington] or Sterling [Tucker], and I was saying, “Well, Marion, I can’t go with that, man.” And, “What do you need to go with it?” I said, “I can’t do it.” But I remember having that conversation with him. But, Richard, to

answer your question, I must have met Marion when I was going around like that, because I was trying my best to build sources.

RM: Let's move to the '78 campaign. Were you the only person at the *Post* who was covering all three campaigns?

MC: No, there were three of us. Because I had been covering the administration, I was on Walter Washington, Leon Dash was on Marion, and Ken Bredemeier was on Sterling. But I had this designation as the chief –

(Phone interruption)

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MC: Okay. There were the three of us. I was supposed to be the chief city hall reporter, because at that time, Herb Denton said, "We're not going to call this the District Building. We're going to call it City Hall, because that's really what it is." And the column I wrote for what was then the *District Weekly* was "Milton Coleman's City Hall Notebook." They had these posters they put in the newsstand that had a picture of me, Milton Coleman, the *Post* chief City Hall reporter, and Bradlee used to kid me about it. In fact, Bradlee signed one of them for me. "Jeez, what are you running for?" And we all jointly covered the campaigns.

Herb, being the good editor that he was, made us all write memos based on whatever we learned from anybody. Whenever we interviewed anybody or whatever, you had to share with the other two people, which also resulted in us giving all of the people who were our sources nicknames so they wouldn't know exactly who they were. Or I would tell Leon or Ken who it was. They knew the nicknames, but you always said, "Well, what if somebody discovers these?" You don't want to have – and what we wanted to avoid is

something I'd run into before, not involving me. But at one point, we were trying to do an investigative story, and three different reporters came back and confirmed the same story. And either Herb or Len said, "Okay. I'm going to take each one of you, and tell me who your source is." And they found out it was three different people talking to the same source. And so, you had one source. But we did all that. And I had some connections, more than Leon and Ken, because I had been dealing with the council and the mayor up until the election on September 12th.

RM: But, again, most of your focus was with Walter Washington?

MC: It was on Walter and the bigger picture. I mean, you know, in campaign coverage, there's candidate coverage, and then there's overall coverage. I did candidate on Walter Washington, and I did the overall stuff most of the time, most of the political pieces.

RM: Let's talk about the big picture. As the campaign began, what was your perception of the big picture? How did it evolve over the period of the campaign? What was your assessment of the three candidates?

MC: Walter Washington was not the best of politicians. That was the rap on Walter. And I learned that primarily from – I've got to be careful here because some of these people are still alive – from talking to people who knew him, who complained that Walter didn't do enough to politically blow his own horn, so to speak. The reference was always made to the fact that you could go to Chicago, and whenever you saw a public works project, it said "Richard J. Daley, Mayor." There was hardly anything that said "Walter Washington, Mayor." But Walter was believed to have strong support among two elements: the poorer people in Washington from the days when he ran the Alley Dwelling

Authority; and the people who he had put in power. And had a big connection at Howard University.

Sterling was perceived as the black bourgeoisie guy that people who lived on the Gold Coast were for, and (unintelligible 00:05:00) were for, and other places. Absolutely no charisma. Too proper for charisma. Walter Washington could preach, had a big following among the church folks in part due to his wife Bennetta, and the fact that he was big in what I think was Third Baptist Church, which I never knew about. But I knew, going around town with Walter, that he had support among the church people, in part because one of the things he'd done when he was in office was he helped all these churches get daycare centers in their buildings. He was good at patronage in that regard. Sterling was the Urban League guy – Urban League, never to be confused with the NAACP – I believe was always considered a little bit more hotsy-totsy. Sterling was not terribly charismatic, but had strong support from people like Bill Fitzgerald, who owned the Independence Federal Savings and Loan, and people like that.

And then there was Marion, and Marion was the activist guy. He was still viewed as a diamond in the rough, and a number of the stories that I wrote sort of underscored that. I remember I wrote a piece that appeared on Inauguration Day on January 2nd, 1979 that talked about how middle class black folks thought Marion was an embarrassment because the way he talked. And I think I pointed out the fact that he would say “tuxeder.” And at that point, I'd already been down to Memphis with Marion for the Democratic Midterm Convention or whatever. But Marion was the activist guy, and Marion had support among whites, which a lot of people really didn't understand. And then he had the

support of the *Washington Post* editorial board, because at the time, Phil Geyelin was the head of the editorial board.

RM: How did that come down, that whole endorsement by the *Washington Post*? Were you aware what had happened?

MC: No, I don't know why it happened. And at the time, Richard, we at the *Post* very strictly observed the wall between church and state. We in the newsroom were set back a bit when they endorsed Marion, because I think we all thought they were going to endorse Sterling or Walter, but not Marion. Not the former dashiki-wearing guy. That was sort of a surprise. And so, no, I can't say more about it than that was a surprise. I was trying to think whether it created a problem for us and our reporting, but it did not. At the time, those of us in the newsroom, we were sort of snarky toward the editorial board. We felt that we were our own people.

And so, Marion's out there running, and I'm not having much to do with Marion because Leon is covering him pretty good. Then I meet Ivanhoe, because at the time, Ivanhoe was the chief of staff. Everyone on the council had an executive assistant and an administrative assistant. Ivanhoe was Marion's executive assistant, Pat Seldon was the administrative assistant. And Ivanhoe was what Jackie Trescott [a *Post* reporter] once called the stage manager for the political drama. Ivanhoe, apparently, would have –, I never had breakfast that often with Ivanhoe. Maybe I never did at all. But Leon used to always say, "Yeah, Ivanhoe wants to have breakfast at McDonald's." (Laughter.) Which was – okay. All right. Maybe that was all right at the time.

But I knew that Ivanhoe and Johnny Wilson were close. I had not met Johnny before I got to the District Building. I knew of him as Johnny Wilson from all the SNCC [Student

Non-Violent Coordinating Committee] people I met when I was in North Carolina, and it turns out I had first encountered John Wilson when I was in college at UWM, trying to avoid the draft, and Johnny Wilson was the head of something called NBAWADU, the National Black Antiwar Antidraft Union, out of New York. And I think – I've never gone back to check this – that he and Marion were up there at the same time.

So, I meet Ivanhoe, and I covered an election in Minneapolis. I cover this election in Montgomery County. I've been brought to the District Building in part because Herb Denton said, "Here's a guy who's covered politics, local politics, in a place where race is not an issue." Because I used to say in Minneapolis there's like ten black people there, seven since me and my family left. And so, I could see when people were playing race and when people were playing politics. So I sit down with Ivanhoe, and Ivanhoe, in his typical way, says, "Well, you know, this is how the election's going to work." "Yeah, Ivanhoe, tell me how the election is going to work." He said, "There's going to be 100,000 votes cast. Three candidates. All Marion has to do is win 35,000 votes." Yeah, okay. Ivanhoe was right. (Laughter.) Ivanhoe was absolutely right. And I saw the election developing, and I don't think we took any polls at that time. Maybe we did.

Betty King: You did.

MC: We did? But I think we saw Marion coming. And I can't recall at this point how I felt before the election, but I know that sometime around September 12th, I had learned something which to this day affects my view of politics on every level, and really, really rings true with this campaign: that the way you win an election is you don't declare yourself a candidate and go out and make your pitch and get people to come over to your side. Not the way Ivanhoe ran the election. The way you run the election is you declare

yourself a candidate, you identify your people, and you get them to the polls. And you don't worry about the other people. Because Ivanhoe's theory was you've got to know how to count. And they would pull out all those damn cards and – what's his name who just left as the head of the Taxi Commission? He was in Ward 1. His wife had this box full of index cards, three-by-five cards. And everybody who had voted – Ron –

RM: Oh, Ron [Linton]. Yeah, Ron. It'll come to us.

MC: His wife, she was the Ward 1 coordinator. And Ivanhoe had all these ward coordinators, and then Anita Bonds was running the whole show from the old fur store on I think F Street or G Street.

Betty King: Miller's Fur Store.

MC: Yeah. And they knew how many votes they needed to get out of each ward in order to win. And also, there was a legend about how Johnny Wilson had engineered one of Fauntroy's elections, because, you know, it used to be that the morning boxes came out at two o'clock. And apparently, in one of Fauntroy's elections, based on the morning boxes they found out they were behind. And by the time the polls closed at eight, they were ahead. They got all those people out. And that's the way Marion ran –

Betty King: Wasn't Marshall Brown the Ward 1 coordinator?

MC: Yeah, I think Marshall was 1. And Ron – God, I think his last name begins with a M. Anyway, it was that person and Romaine – no, Romaine Thomas was Walter Washington in Ward 5.

BK: No, no. She was with us.

MC: Was she? I thought she was in 5.

BK: She ran the ward for us.

MC: And that was Ivanhoe's way of running elections. And if you look right now, that's exactly what Trump is doing. Trump doesn't give a hoot about the people in the middle. He wants to get out his folks. And that's how elections are run.

BK: The *Post* had a pollster. Was his name Sussman?

MC: Barry Sussman.

BK: Barry Sussman came to see Marion after the primary and said, "Marion, how did we get it so wrong?" So, they did poll, and they showed that Marion had no chance.

MC: Yeah, I can't remember that. At that stage in my career, I was not involved in the polling. Later on, I was always involved in what were the questions going to be, how were we going to do it anyway. But that's my thing about seeing the election develop. Once the primary was over, I spent more time with Marion, because, actually, for the general, I was the only reporter on it, and I did both Marion and Art Fletcher [Republican candidate for Mayor in the General Election]. Because I remember we went down to Ward 8, and Marion went in and said to this one garden party, he said, "Oh, it's wonderful to be back here in Anacostia." And the woman who was throwing the party said, "Congress Heights, Mr. Mayor." Marion said, "Excuse me." (Laughter.) And I think then is the first time I got in trouble with Cora, because I had written a piece in which I said something that Marion had told me. Because I always tell people, I learned politics from Marion Barry. Marion had told me that people in Ward 8 don't count because they don't vote. And I said that, probably in one of my *District Weekly* columns. Cora got on my case. She was at UDC [University of the District of Columbia] at the time. Wrote a letter to Howard Simons, who was then the managing editor of the *Post*, suggesting that I be fired.

RM: This was Cora Masters.

MC: Cora Masters, yeah.

RM: Who later became Cora Masters Barry.

MC: Yeah. But who, like everyone else, I made up with. And I'll tell you, when I lived in Southeast Washington, I used to go running at night, and I would run across the Sousa Bridge. And at one point, I crossed the Sousa Bridge, getting ready to go down Pennsylvania Avenue to the Capitol. There's a place where the cars come up from the Southeast/Southwest Expressway, I'm trying to go across that place. And I didn't think I was going to make it. This car was coming up, and it stops to let me through. It was Cora. And I said, "Boy, Cora could have wiped my ass out, but she didn't." But yeah, I learned politics from Marion. And when he won, politically, he cast the mold for how you win political office citywide in DC, and it was very, very simple. First of all – this is, again, Ivanhoe – in the Democratic primary, the importance of the wards are 4, 5, 7, and 8. And in the general, the importance of the wards are 3, 4, 5, 7, and 8, because 3 doesn't vote in the Democratic primary. That's where mostly Republicans are. And if you can win the black wards and not get trounced in the white wards, you can win citywide. And Marion won in the white wards and did not get trounced in the black wards, but if you look at every single election thereafter, Marion –

Betty King: I think he won big in the white wards in '78?

MC: Uh-huh. And every mayoral election since then, particularly every primary, it has followed the Marion Barry example until it has changed somewhat citywide now because of what's happening around Gallaudet and NoMa. There are more whites moving in there. And we've lost population in 7 and 8. But that's the racial breakdown of the city,

and Marion understood that. And master politician that he was, he wins with a white base in '78 and immediately transforms his base into black, and keeps a significant portion of the white base, at least for the first time around. And then it turns against him, but by that time, he's got 4, 5, 7, and 8 so sewed up you're not going to beat him. You're not going to beat him at all. And he was good.

I was city editor for three years, and then I went to the national staff for the *Post*. I came back in 1986 as the metro editor, and the first thing I said was going to do was I was going to have lunch with all the chief executives in the Metropolitan Area. So I had lunch with Marion and [Alexandria mayor] Jim Moran, all sorts – and Jack Herrity was the guy in Fairfax at the time. And I came back and I told Len Downie, who was then the managing editor, I said, "You know, Len, I had lunch with Marion today." And he said, "What did you think?" I said, "You know, I realized how good a politician he is. Really a good politician." And this was the time when Marion was really getting into trouble left and right, but he was a good politician. He understood that very well.

RM: To summarize, and you sort of said this, but just to reiterate it, why did Marion Barry win the primary of 1978?

MC: That's a different question. I think Marion won because, first of all, he understood the racial foundation of politics in DC, and they realized that the black vote was going to split between Sterling and Walter, and that's what it did. And if he could then get an overwhelming white vote, he could get in. And it's my suspicion, or my theory, whatever, that they understood that politically. Because I think that Marion, in his heart, was always the pro-black mayor, but he was also the guy who wanted to win politically, and he knew how he could do it.

If you go back at it, he was, early on, positioning himself for that. I remember two things. Marion was so political that when the Hanafi Muslims took over the District Building [in January 1977] and Marion was wounded, they then – Marion sent out a press release or something saying he was okay. And nobody at the time had pointed out, of course he was okay, the bullet only grazed his jacket. Come on. And in the District Building press corps, we would joke that he sent out a press release, the first sentence of which would be, “Marion Barry, comma, still clutching the bullet hole in his chest, comma.” (Laughter.) And they did that.

I mean, but look at what he did. He got the police union behind him. He got the cops’ union behind him. And I remember after Marion won the primary, he had a luncheon at the Madison, across the street from the *Post*. So I go over there, and I’m looking for quotes. And the two best quotes I got, one of them was from Bud Doggett, the parking guy. And this was not to me, but he told Marion when he come up to Marion to shake his hand, and Bud said, “You know, if I would have known you were going to win, I would have voted for you.” (Laughter.) And then at the time, John Jacob was the head of the Urban League. I think at that time he was still the head of the Washington Urban League. I think that was before he became head of the national. But anyway, I asked John on the record, “So, what are all these business guys doing here?” And John said, “You know, they thought Marion the wild man was going to be Marion the wild mayor, and he’s not.” It was a good insight on John Jacob’s part.

But I think Marion, politically, understood the situation, and I think that he understood that the Sterling and Walter Washington voters were the old guard. One of Marion’s favorite phrases during the campaign was that he was tired of “the bumbling and

bungling of Walter Washington's administration," and Marion had a hit list of the people he was going to fire once he got in office, kind of like Sharon Pratt Dixon had the broom [when she became Mayor]. And it was so interesting to me, because Marion did get rid of two or three of them, then I think he realized he had to make peace with this bureaucracy. That was the end of the hit list. And again, a good politician.

RM: But the fact, in your view, that the win was based on the white vote in the city, that simply reinforces the importance of the *Washington Post* editorial endorsement –

MC: Oh, yeah.

RM: – which happened not once, twice, but three times. But even now, I understand when you're a reporter and that distance and everything, I mean, have you not found out anything since then about how that came about?

MC: No.

RM: Tom Sherwood, in his book with Jaffe, writes that Katherine Graham found out about it after the fact.

MC: No, I never tried to find out about it.

RM: You just weren't curious about it?

MC: No, no, I wasn't. Because all of that time – well, first of all Phil Geyelin was only the editorial page editor for a short time thereafter. Because I remember once going to lunch at the Madison with Dave Abramson, and Phil Geyelin was coming out, and me and Abramson were going in, and Geyelin had caught a lot of hell because the *Post*, in '78, not only endorsed Marion two weeks before the election, but ran a pro-Marion editorial just about every day. And people said, "God, they're his public relations arm on the editorial page." And of course, Dave Abramson was, in fact, in charge of campaign

publicity. And so, he and I were going in, Jalen was coming out, and I said, "Phil, let me introduce you to somebody who everybody thought you really were." (Laughter.) And I introduced him to Dave Abramson.

But, no, we in the newsroom really looked down upon the editorial board. And, I've got to tell you, up until about the time that he retired as the executive editor of the *Post*, Leonard Downie very famously and unapologetically said, "I don't read editorials because I don't want my thinking to be influenced by them." And I didn't read editorials, either.

RM: Do you know who wrote the editorials?

MC: No. Because at the time, I had no idea how the editorial board worked. I mean, I know now that there are certain people who specialize in certain things. Back when I was at the *Post*, I could have told you who wrote just about every editorial, who was the main writer for them, because I knew the way they divided up the work. I didn't know that at that time, and I got no inkling of that until probably my last years as metro editor, would have been the early nineties. And then, of course, I learned more about it once I became the deputy managing editor, only because I learned more about the way that they worked, and I recruited a couple of people for the editorial board, like Jonathan Capehart. And as president of the American Society of News Editors and the American Press Association, I sometimes was in this position where I would go to somebody on the editorial board and say, "You ought to write an editorial about this particular issue of press freedom in Latin America."

RM: Did Marion and the other candidates have a separate meeting with the editorial board, or did they do a sit-down with the reporters and editors?

MC: The way it worked then was very simple. The editorial board then, and I'm sure even now, has meetings with candidates that are "off the record," in the sense that you cannot quote anybody by name and you can't even refer to them as a source. We in the newsroom never went to those meetings because we had – and the *Post*, I think, still has – a policy where we don't do anything off the record. If off the record means that the amnesia rule is in effect, you said something and I have to act like I never heard you say it, I don't want to hear it. Because the only reason I'm sitting down with you, Richard and Betty, is I want to get some news for the newspaper.

However, the newsroom would have luncheons. We'd invite people in for lunch. We had Marion in for lunch, we had Sterling in for lunch, had Walter in for lunch. And there would be two or three editorial people at the meeting, at that luncheon. The luncheon was on the record, because we did nothing off the record. And if you wanted it to be on background, you had to say that, and we had to agree to it before you said something which we would not quote you on, even though we might use it in reporting. Most people don't really understand the way on the record and off the record, and sources, really work. Most people think that all the Watergate stuff came because they got all this information from Deep Throat off the record. No, they didn't. Deep Throat was never a source for an individual story. He was always talking to them, talking to Bob [Woodward], for guidance. He would tell you, "Follow the money. Do this and do that." He wouldn't say, "This was responsible for this. Follow the money." That's my understanding. I was not in the newsroom for Watergate.

But, no, we were not a part of that at all. And I only went to editorial board meetings after I was deputy managing editor, and most of them I went to then involved people

from Latin America or had something to do with Latin America unless it was something that I arranged for newsroom people, in which case it was not off the record.

RM: Was there any story that you were working on during the '78 campaign that, for whatever reason, you weren't able to do the story, you thought this might make a good story? I mean, to be blunt about it, was there some dirt that you had heard about a candidate and you were trying to, but you weren't able to write the story, finish your reporting?

MC: No. No, not that I can recall. I do not recall what the story was that Marion and I were talking about at the Two Continents that he wanted me to try to do something on.

RM: This was something about Sterling Tucker?

MC: I can't recall specifically what it was. And if I did, I wouldn't tell you, because although I can say I was talking to Marion about it because Marion is gone, it would break the covenant. I'm trying to remember. I don't think there was anything that had to do with the campaign, but that would depend on when we wrote the stories about Walter Washington and the parking lot people, and Nick Antonelli. And see, I think those were before the campaign. I think they followed after the Yeldell stuff, and I think the Yeldell trial took place before –

RM: Before '78. There were two trials.

MC: Yeah.

RM: Okay. Well, not to beleaguer that point. But to get back to the big picture here, because before we started recording, we were talking about 1978. What do you remember about that time, that year? And as you look back on it decades later, what lasting significance do you feel there was as a result of that campaign? Was the city a different city because Marion won that election as opposed to other candidates?

MC: I think that Marion was an iconic generational figure. You know, you asked earlier about what was it that Marion did to put together the group that won for him, and the one group I was going to talk about, but then I lost my train of thought, was Marion also recognized that he could get enough white votes to win. He recognized that the core of the black vote would be split between Walter and Sterling. But he also recognized that there were people like Sybil [Hammond], like Ivanhoe, who were part of that younger generation. I remember writing a piece when Marion took office, and the city was going through financial hardships. And Marion and Ivanhoe were sitting down almost on a daily basis, deciding what money to spend and what money not to spend. And I remember, on the one hand, describing them and their generation as being the Afro-Bloomingdales generation, which follow a lot on how Jim Palmer, Crystal's dad, had sort of adopted, for lack of a better term, Marion the hick, and gotten him out of leisure suits and taken him down to Raleigh's, and sort of dressed him up. But also, I remember that somebody – it was either Ivanhoe or [Elijah] Baby Rogers [Barry's first City Administrator] – who came to say that Marion represented a can-do generation of black folks.

And I think that Marion very much was embarrassed by what he called the bumbling and bungling of the Walter Washington administration. I'm pretty certain that Marion and Ivanhoe had respect for the Walter Washington generation, for what they had done. It was no easy task for Walter Washington to do what he did. But, to steal a phrase from Barack Obama, I think Marion believed that, as black folks, we can do better. We can do better than this. And that was, I think, the tenor of the time. Because remember that Courtland Cox, Ivanhoe Donaldson, Marion Barry, Charlie Cobb, a number of these other folks who were in SNCC, and even people like Milton Coleman, came to Washington

because it was a predominantly black city where you could get something done, and that was really important.

And people seem to forget about or maybe don't even know, yeah, Marion Barry went to LeMoyne College, and, yeah, Marion Barry was in college at the University of Tennessee and then dropped out. What was Marion Barry studying? Chemistry. He was a chemistry major. No sociology bullshit. It was chemistry. Marion Barry was smart. And I remember, because Marion was also my teacher about the budget, and there was something that somebody wanted to get something done and it was going to cost \$100,000. And I went to Marion, I said, "Marion, that's \$100,000, man." And Marion said, "Look, you can always find \$100,000 in a billion-dollar budget." (Laughter.) Okay. All right.

And people forget that when Marion was at-large member of the council, Marion was in charge of financial revenue, and to do that, you had to be able to count. And folks always felt black folks can't count. I mean, I was very proud when people would say when I was in Minneapolis, "Oh, that's that *Star's* budget guy." Yeah, I'm their guy on municipal finance, and I'm black. I can count. And so, Marion, he was iconic. He was the can-do generation. And Baby Rogers represented that, too, and even Bob Moore. And for Marion to initially name Gladys Mack as the budget director, a black woman in charge of the money? Oh, come on. That's hot stuff.

In my view, at that time, that was same impact as, at one point, the *Washington Post* ran a story on Condoleezza Rice [President George W. Bush's Secretary of State] in the style section. And there was Condi Rice, a black woman, with a big picture of this black woman reading a Russian newspaper. And you said, "Goddamn. What is that?" And I

think Marion recognized that. And he recognized from his days in the south that need to give these kids some summer jobs, because that's what's going to cut down on violence in the streets, they got something to do. Jim Vance was on TV a year or so ago saying that his children got their first summer jobs from Marion. And I still run into people who were in the Marion's Youth Leadership Institute. That was a sort of a generational thing about him.

I think people never gave Marion the credit he deserved as a politician because it got all hung up on the racial thing. And if you take it out of the context of race, here's a guy who goes to prison – people will always say, "Marion Barry, who left office in disgrace." That's the phrase. Marion Barry was indicted on, if my memory is correct, twelve counts. He was convicted on one, acquitted on one, the jury hung on ten. And the one he was convicted on was something that most people are not convicted on, don't go to prison on. Okay? So Marion Barry goes into prison, comes out, and gets reelected. Come on. How many politicians can say that? That's a good politician, a really good politician. And only said, "I'm hanging it up," after it became clear that they were going to punish him for being reelected, and that's when the Control Board came in and everything else. And people didn't understand that about Marion. But he was a good politician. I mean, he knew how to get himself in trouble. But I wrote a piece after Marion died. It appeared in the style section. And I said in that story, which I genuinely believe, that at that point, everybody used to realize that, hey, that's Marion. You can expect Marion to step in it every now and then. Because I used to run into Fred Cooke [at one time Barry's Corporation Counsel and later in private life, his lawyer] all

the time, and, “Fred, how you doing?” “Don’t ask me nothing about my client.”

(Laughter.) So that’s how Marion was.

And if you look at Marion, he was emblematic of a generation of black mayors, which, Washington in unique in that some of those black mayors were succeeded kind of forever, or in immediate following years, by nobody else black. And Marion’s legacy was quite different. But I think he was really a better politician than people gave him credit for. And also, the last thing that sort of came to mind about Marion recently was this thing with Trump and the disabled reporter. Do you all know who that was?

RM: He’s a reporter for the *New York Times*.

MC: Yeah, Serge Kovaleski. And Serge worked for me for a while, because he came to the *Post* from the *New York Daily News* to the financial section, and then he came to metro. And something happened I think up in Mount Pleasant, and Marion was grandstanding about it. And Serge, a very good reporter, a very good parachute reporter – you can throw Serge into something and twenty-four hours later, you’ve got a story. And this thing up in Mount Pleasant, something else happened, Marion tried to do his number on it. And Serge reported it, and it was very clear that Marion was trying to do a number on him. And so I ran into Marion a little later and I sort of half-jokingly said, “Well, how are you getting along with Serge?” And Marion said, “Oh. You mean Scourge?”

(Laughter.)

It was typical Marion in the sense that he had a little nickname for somebody, and he’d always get on your case, but it was never really personal. Because even Ivanhoe – Ivanhoe used to call me the hit man. But when I then saw Trump get up there and talk about Serge, because Serge was the one who had reported that all these people who were

supposed to be cheering after 9/11, there was no evidence that there ever was that. And so, Trump gets up there and talks about this reporter. Didn't name him. But then says, "Oh, you ought to see this guy." If you've ever seen Serge Kovaleski, Serge's hands are kind of locked up like that. That's his disability.

And then Trump came out and said, "I've never met him." And I said, "Wow." Because usually when Trump speaks, his hands are either like this or like that. Never before then and never since has he put his hands up like that. And I said, "He's making fun of Scourge." Because I call him Scourge. The last time I saw him was in the lobby of the *New York Times*. I said, "Scourge, what's up?" "Hey, man." But Marion had a good relationship with the press. I can tell all this now. When –

RM: Oh, that's what we want to do. Tell us more. (Laughter.)

MC: So, there was the thing with Aunt Bettye, and Marion was, apparently, having this affair with the woman who was, at the time, working for Lazard Freres, or whatever that firm is. So [reporter Tom] Sherwood gets the tip that Marion is going to the islands with Aunt Bettye. And Sherwood gets this tip like on a Friday morning or something, and Marion is supposed to be leaving the next day. So we say, "Okay. This is our chance to find out if he's really doing everything we heard he was doing." So, "Well, Sherwood, you can't go down there, because he knows who you are."

So, we went to Lee Hockstader, who is now on the editorial page. At the time, Lee was the government reporter, I think, in Fairfax County. He may have gone to the state legislature by then, but I think he was in Fairfax County. So we said, "Well, Lee, you've got to go down there." And at the time, the *Post* used to have a safe where they kept cash for people who had to get on the road quickly. And it was late, I think on a Friday, so

whoever knew the combination was gone, and we needed to get Lee an airplane ticket and some pocket money. So I go to Continental Liquors and tell the guy, "I've got to cash a check for like \$300 or \$400." He got me the cash, gave the money to Hockstader. Hockstader gets on the plane, goes down there, and just sits around the pool in his bathing suit. Marion has no idea who he is. And the day before Marion is supposed to leave, he's goes up and says, "Hi, Mr. Mayor. My name is Lee Hockstader. I'm a reporter for the *Washington Post*." And he charted everything that Marion was doing. My phone rings and it's Marion, and Marion says, "You can't run that story." I said, "Mr. Mayor, we're going to run the story." He says, "If you run that story, I'm going to turn the entire black community against you." And I said, "We're going to run the story." We ran the story. I never heard anything from Marion since. I don't know what relationships he had with other reporters, but ours was a good professional relationship, and I think Marion never got credit for that. There were people at the *Post* who always thought I was being soft on Marion, which Marion would never tell you. But he was good in that particular way, and I give him credit for that. I can't think of any other good Marion Barry –

RM: No more dirt for us? Okay. Well, let me ask you this. Since you're the guy who's used to asking questions, is there any question I didn't ask? Ask a question to yourself, and I'll answer it. No.

MC: No, I can't think of anything else. I can't think of any other Marion Barry stories. If you haven't, you should read the piece I wrote on Marion. Did you read that piece in style?

RM: I did.

Betty King: I did. Yeah, I've got it in my files.

MC: Okay. And then also, WETA [Public TV] did this series of Washington in the sixties, seventies, eighties, nineties.

RM: Right. Yeah.

MC: They interviewed me for the piece on Washington in the eighties, and I talked a lot about Marion, because the eighties was, in essence, Marion's time.

BK: I must get that. I must have been out of town when it aired. I haven't seen that.

RM: They keep repeating it.

MC: Yeah, they repeat it a lot.

RM: Yeah, I think I've seen all three. They did sixties, seventies, and eighties, right?

MC: Yeah. And I don't think I wrote anything else about Marion. No. But he was good.

[End of Interview]